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FM AMEMBASSY MANAMA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6124
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RHBVAKS/COMUSNAVCENT PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 MANAMA 002004

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/04/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [BA](#) [POL](#)
SUBJECT: BAHRAIN'S ELECTIONS: DESPITE ALLEGED FLAWS, A
SIGNIFICANT STEP AHEAD

REF: A. MANAMA 1995
[1](#)B. MANAMA 1984
[1](#)C. MANAMA 1963
[1](#)D. MANAMA 1953

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Bahrain's parliamentary elections, held in two rounds November 25 and December 2, represent a major step forward in the King's democratic reform program. In a significant improvement over the 2002 parliamentary elections, which were marred by a boycott by leading Shia opposition political society Al Wifaq and its allies, over 73 percent of Bahraini voters participated in the first round of elections and 69 percent of eligible voters took part in the second round runoff elections. Demonstrating that it is the voice of the great majority of Shia Bahrainis, Al Wifaq won 17 of the 18 elections it contested (out of 40 total seats). Its presence in the parliament - within the political system rather than out on the streets - is a real accomplishment that greatly enhances the credibility of the parliament and the reform program.

[1](#)2. (C) Islamist candidates, both Sunni and Shia, achieved the greatest successes in the elections, taking 35 of 40 seats. However, their ability to see through an Islamist agenda is severely limited. The government controls most of the levers of legislative power, and the Islamists are split almost exactly in half between Sunnis (18 MPs) and Shias (17 MPs), with each group having radically different policy priorities. The Sunnis focus on introducing religion into everyday life while the Shias will advocate increased attention to social problems such as unemployment, low wages, lack of public housing, and mediocre public education and health care in poor Shia areas. The big losers in the elections were liberals, moderates, and technocrats, including the secular, liberal opposition society Al Waad, whose six candidates failed to take any seats.

[1](#)3. (C) The government is likely pleased with the outcome of the elections, which balance the influence of the Sunni and Shia communities. Critics allege that this is no accident, saying the government has employed long-term and short-term measures to boost the chances of candidates friendly to the government. These include drawing electoral districts to ensure an almost even Sunni-Shia split, despite Sunnis representing only about one-third of the citizenry. The government is alleged to have used its naturalization law to grant citizenship to Sunni Arab, Pakistani, and other South and Southeast Asian residents. During the elections, the military and security forces reportedly mobilized their

personnel to vote for pro-government candidates while well-known preachers urged voters to cast ballots for Sunni Islamists. (Shia religious figures did the same on Al Wifaq's behalf.) There are accusations that the ten general polling centers could have been the site of possible tampering, and it is true that votes from the general centers played a decisive role in three races.

¶4. (C) Election monitors have not yet released their findings, but a preliminary report from an independent committee composed of local NGOs issued after the first round of voting recommended that election officials ensure uniformity and increased transparency in announcing poll results. This particular item seems to have been remedied in the second round. The sectarian split of the parliament, between Sunni government supporters and Shia oppositionists, is likely a satisfactory outcome for Royal Family hardliners, who seek to paint the opposition as being a Shia-only segment of the political spectrum. The Shias' long-term commitment to staying inside the system depends on their ability to deliver on the demands of their constituents, and the government would be wise to engage on these issues. End Summary.

Islamists Claim 35 of 40 Seats in Parliament

¶5. (C) Bahrain's historic second set of elections for the lower house of parliament, the Council of Representatives (COR), since the adoption of the 2002 constitution concluded December 2 with Sunni and Shia Islamists occupying up to 35 of the chamber's 40 seats. Participation in the November 25 first round topped 73 percent of registered voters and

MANAMA 00002004 002 OF 006

reached 69 percent in the December 2 second round. (Appointments to the 40-member upper house Shura Council are expected to be announced shortly.) The single largest bloc in the COR is held by leading Shia opposition political society Al Wifaq, with 17 seats. Al Wifaq is making its first entry into the COR, having boycotted the 2002 parliamentary elections to protest the 2002 constitution, and Al Wifaq's participation and success mark an important step forward in the King's democratic reform process. The next largest group is the Sunni Salafi Al Asala political society, which now holds eight seats following the December 3 announcement that three MPs who had run as independents have joined Al Asala. There are reports that the society could attract the membership, or at a minimum the support, of three other independents. The Muslim Brotherhood-associated Al Minbar political society took seven seats.

¶6. (C) Among the five remaining independent MPs, most prominent is former and likely future COR Chairman Khalifa Al Dhahrani. He is close to the Sunni Islamists but is widely viewed to be the chamber's elder statesman and generally tries to remain above the fray. He is the only sitting MP who also served in the 1973 parliament. Liberal Abdul Aziz Abul is the only Sunni oppositionist to have been elected, having received the support of both Al Wifaq and the liberal, secular Al Waad political society during the campaign period.

(None of Al Waad's six parliamentary candidates made it to the COR despite three reaching the second round and a fourth, female candidate Munira Fakhro, coming very close to making the second round.) He will ally himself with Al Wifaq on political, economic, and social, but not religious, issues. Independent Adel Al Asoomi, a businessman with ties to the Prime Minister, and Lateefa Al Qaoud, Bahrain's first female MP, have no apparent links with the Islamist societies but are both safely pro-government.

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Limited COR Ability to Enact Religious Measures

¶7. (C) Given the overwhelmingly Islamist nature of the COR, observers expect there to be renewed parliamentary action on issues related to the introduction of Islamic law into everyday life. These include moves to ban or limit access to alcohol, restrictions on nightclubs, and more stringent curbs on prostitution - steps to promote "family" or "clean" tourism, advocates say. The COR could revive efforts to create a Committee to Promote Virtue and Combat Vice along the lines of the Saudi religious police, or mutawa'een.

¶8. (C) The COR's ability to implement such steps, however, is severely curtailed. The 2002 constitution gives the government the sole right to draft legislation, and the Shura Council and Cabinet can easily stop or defer COR legislative initiatives. The previous COR often passed measures known as "iqtirahat bi raghba" (desired proposals), which are similar to U.S. "Sense of the Congress" motions in that they express a point of view but carry no legislative weight. In the past, the government has for the most part ignored these proposals until such a time as it needs something from the COR, when it may then negotiate implementation of all or part of a proposal in exchange for something it wants. An example is the ban on selling alcohol during the holy month of Ramadan. Before Ramadan 2005 (October/November), five-star hotels were allowed to sell alcohol at bars and restaurants. The government suddenly announced a ban on alcohol at the start of the month, taking hotels by surprise. Some ignored the order and were later fined and forced to keep bars and restaurants closed during the post-Ramada holiday of Eid Al Fitr. All hotels complied with the order during Ramadan 2006 (September/October).

plit on Sunni, Shia Legislative Agendas

¶9. (C) Al Wifaq Secretary General Shaikh Ali Salman has been the most vocal politician in reaching across the aisle in the post-election period. He told journalist December 3, "We will work in close cooperation with other political societies in order to achieve our goals collectively. Now we are a strong group in parliament... We will focus on building a society where everybody can have a job, house, and education." In a November 29 interview, he said, I can assure you that the common ground that Al Sala, Al Minbar, and Al Wifaq share is vast and needs to be put into practice with other groups."

¶10. (C) But the potential for COR unity on Islamic actions should not be exaggerated. Two overlapping but not identical

MANAMA 00002004 003 OF 006

fault lines run through the parliament -- the Sunni/Shia and pro-government/opposition splits. The existence of these camps argues strongly against the development of a united, efficiently Islamist COR that a shallow analysis of the election results might suggest. The opposition agenda, that of Al Wifaq and Independent Abul, focuses on social issues such as unemployment, wage growth, education, housing, and health care, mostly to improve the lot of Bahrain's Shia majority. They could also move toward addressing fundamental political grievances such as proposing constitutional reform, redrawing parliamentary constituencies, investigating corruption, and institutionalizing decision-making on land zoning and reclamation projects.

¶11. (C) The Sunni Islamist legislative agenda, by contrast, focuses mainly on the introduction of Islamic law and practices into Bahraini society. During the previous legislative session, the Sunni Islamists were reliably pro-government on issues outside the realm of religion. They will continue to be with the government, and will be joined by non-Islamist Independent Sunni MPs Al Asoomi and Al Qaoud. In some cases, there are indications that the government allowed the Sunnis to stake out extreme positions on certain issues, enabling the government to step in to demand a

reasonable compromise. An example is the battle earlier this year on a long-debated draft press law. Islamists demanded stringent penalties, including lengthy jail sentences, for journalists found guilty of covering forbidden topics such as the catch-all "harming the unity of the country." Liberals and some newspapers reacted, sparking a high volume war of words. Although there appeared to be consensus on the idea of fines and sanctions for guilty journalists, the COR never voted on the press law. The issue is certain to resurface during the coming parliamentary session.

What Happened to the Moderates?

¶12. (C) The losers in the elections were liberals and moderates. The previous parliament boasted a great number of business people, economists, and technocrats - so much so that one MP commented that there could have been two fully staffed economic and financial affairs committees. The coming parliament will have a difficult time putting together one. The only qualified MPs who stand out are Al Wifaq Ph.D. economist and professor Dr. Jassim Hussein and businessman Al Asoomi. Ahmed Juma, chairman of the moderate Al Mithaq political society, told the press that the massive success of the Islamists "is a political tsunami that needs to be contained before it devastates the liberal and tolerant foundations of the nation." Prominent Al Watan columnist Sawsan Al Shaer has written a series of articles complaining that the "silent majority" of Bahrain's moderates are not represented in the COR and she calls on the King to appoint centrists to the Shura Council to provide balance. Lamenting the Islamic nature of the COR, Al Ayam columnist Saeed Al Hamad writes, "it is regrettable to see Bahrain lose its tolerance."

¶13. (C) With its collapse in the elections, Al Waad is looking to pick up the pieces. Secretary General Ibrahim Sharif, who lost in a runoff election to Abdul Rahman Bumjeed, told the press December 3 that the society will build up its popular support through more interaction with the public, including the establishment of local branches in areas where it has a following. Two of its candidates, Munira Fakhro and Abdul Rahman Al Nuaimi, claim to have lost their elections because of votes cast for their competitors in the ten general polling centers. Fakhro's court case demanding an investigation was rejected by the Court of Cassation December 4, and Al Nuaimi is preparing to file a similar case contesting the outcome of his election.

Strategies for Long-Term Up Support for Government

¶14. (C) The election outcome, with a Sunni majority in the COR representing a country where about two-thirds of the citizens are Shia, comes as no accident, and likely reflects the Royal Family and government's preference. A minister very close to the King told the Ambassador some time ago that the parliamentary electoral constituencies are designed so as to result in a 50-50 split between Sunnis and Shias. This is gerrymandering taken to extremes: the smallest district covering the (Sunni) southern reaches of the country has less than 1,200 voters while the largest district, comprising Shia villages just outside Manama has 15,500 voters, a magnitudinal difference of 13 times. The Minister of

MANAMA 00002004 004 OF 006

Interior told the Ambassador December 5 that it was important to have a "balanced" parliament so that both Sunnis and Shias feel they have a stake in the system.

¶15. (C) Critics allege that the government has employed its naturalization law in an attempt to alter the sectarian balance in the country. An unknown number of Saudi members of the Al Dossari tribe, likely 10,000 or more, received

Bahraini citizenship years ago on the grounds that Bahrain is their ancestral home. Shia politicians and activists have accused the government of recent illegal "political naturalization;" that is, granting citizenship to foreigners - Arabs, Pakistanis, and non-Muslims, including Indians, Sri Lankans, and southeast Asians - who have not fulfilled the law's residency requirements or, if they have fulfilled the requirements, received expedited processing. Last summer there were allegations that the passports directorate of the Ministry of Interior was issuing thousands of passports to newly naturalized citizens. Despite the naturalization law's stipulation that new citizens cannot vote until after holding citizenship for ten years, government officials declared that the 2002 election law's provision that all citizens can vote superseded the naturalization law.

Mobilizing Friendly Voters...

¶16. (C) Moving from the strategic to the tactical, many Bahrainis believe that the government had a hand in mobilizing voters presumed to be pro-government - most Sunnis, especially Islamists, members of the military and security services, and newly naturalized citizens. There are many reports of military and police officers holding the passports and identification documents of their personnel until election day. This forced the staff to come to assembly points to retrieve their documents, at which time buses were provided to bring them to the general voting centers after the personnel had received advice from their superiors about which candidates to support or not to support. The brother of an Embassy staff member works in the health services department of the Bahrain Defense Force (BDF). He reported that a commanding officer instructed personnel not to vote for opposition candidates because the opposition might cut the BDF's budget, possibly leading to layoffs.

¶17. (C) The Al Waad candidates, symbolically important because they are Sunni (vice Shia) oppositionists, were forced to deal with outside efforts to support their opponents and, at the same time, a smear campaign of their personal reputations. Prominent Sunni preachers, including some Islamist MPs, delivered sermons one day before both election days urging listeners to vote for anyone but Al Waad (Al Wifaq did not have candidates in districts with Al Waad candidates). Al Waad candidate Al Nuaimi has complained that Islamist MPs Mohammed Khalid and Jassim Al Saeedi delivered sermons in mosques in his district on December 1 urging voters to cast their ballots for his opponent Isa Abul Fateh. Khalid and Al Saeedi normally speak at mosques in East Riffa and Hamad Town, nowhere near Al Nuaimi's Muharraq district. (Note: Sunnis were not the only ones using religious figures to promote election participation. Senior Shia cleric Shaikh Isa Qassim and others repeatedly urged listeners to vote for the "faithful" bloc, understood to be Al Wifaq.)

...While Smearing Opposition Candidates

¶18. (C) Ibrahim Sharif and (non-Waad but liberal, secular) Abdul Aziz Abul told Emboffs about smear campaigns employing cellphone SMS messages, leaflets, and posters accusing them and other Al Waad candidates of being communists, rejecting God and religion, and supporting prostitution. Munira Fakhro faced particularly vicious accusations that implied she was sexually promiscuous. Sharif told us that the thoroughness and complexity of these efforts signal that they were carried out by a government organization, either the intelligence or security services, in his view.

The X Factor: General Polling Centers

¶19. (C) The ten general polling centers have been a central

focus of those concerned with possible governmental manipulation of the elections. The original justification for their existence in the 2002 elections was that citizens living in areas where the majority of people were boycotting

MANAMA 00002004 005 OF 006

would feel uncomfortable voting in their district centers, and so they could cast their ballots at the general centers. With the end of the boycott by political societies (only some supporters of the hardline Shia Al Haq movement boycotted this election), the need for the general centers seems to have disappeared. But the government justified their existence by saying they are a convenience that encourages citizens living or working some distance from their district centers to vote.

120. (C) Critics complain that the general centers are ripe for manipulation because they are far from villages and neighborhoods where residents likely could identify outsiders coming to vote in a district center. There is no evidence, but plenty of accusations, that voters with no fixed addresses voted at the general centers, where they were told in which district to vote and for which candidate. The same allegations are made about the Saudi Al Dossaris, who have no address in, indeed very little if any connection to, Bahrain, as well as military and security cadres and newly naturalized citizens. In three races, involving Fakhro, Al Nuaimi, and Sharif, votes cast in the general centers were disproportionately in favor of the Al Waad candidates' competitors, and ensured their opponents' victories. These accusations, combined with election monitors' concerns about the lack of transparency in some aspects of how those running the general polling centers carried out the first round of the elections on November 25 (para 21), do not necessarily mean the centers were used to influence the outcomes of specific races. But there are serious questions that have not been answered to date.

Some Transparency Issues in Conduct of Elections

121. (C) The independent NGO Election Monitoring Joint Committee (EMJC) has not yet issued a preliminary report on the December 2 voting, but following the first round of voting, which took place on November 25, it issued a strong recommendation that the High Commission for Elections ensure uniformity and increased transparency in announcing poll results. The EMJC suggested that election officials announce the number of voters who cast ballots, the number of valid and invalid ballots, and a detailed breakdown of votes for each candidate at the district and general polling centers prior to the movement of the ballots and tally sheets to governorate level supervisory centers (Ref B). Privately, EMJC leaders have told Poloff that these recommendations result from reports that judges at the general polling centers did not permit monitors to observe the counting of votes, did not announce the results before departing the centers, and did not provide candidates with a list of the names of all those who voted in the elections they were contesting. Initial indications are that in the second round of voting, judges did announce the results at general polling centers before departing for the supervisory centers.

122. (C) EMJC leader and member of the board of Al Waad Abdullah Al Durazi, speaking in his private capacity, complained to the press December 3 that there was "circumstantial evidence" that pro-government Sunnis won as a result of fraud, specifically citing the December 2 runoff races involving three Al Waad candidates. He claimed there were widespread reports of soldiers being ordered to vote for pro-government candidates and the existence of some 8,000 "floating voters" without addresses who were reportedly sent to vote in particularly tight races. He criticized the use of the ten general polling centers, saying they were unnecessary in such a small country. (Comment: Al Durazi's

comments likely reflect his personal frustration with the outcomes of the elections involving Al Waad candidates, rather than a measured analysis and evaluation of the transparency of the elections. Post will report the conclusions of the EMJC as they become available.)

Comment

¶23. (C) Although they represent almost 90 percent of the COR's members, Islamists are likely to find only limited success pursuing a religious agenda. The government maintains almost all of the levers of legislative power in its hands and it will want to protect Bahrain's reputation as a liberal oasis in the Gulf attractive to Western residents and investments. As in the past, the government is expected mostly to ignore the COR's religiously oriented "iqtirahat bi raghba," and engage MPs on these issues only when it needs to cut a deal, offering some limited implementation of an

MANAMA 00002004 006 OF 006

Islamist proposal as a quid pro quo for support for a GOB priority.

¶24. (C) Many observers believe that a COR split on sectarian grounds is exactly what the government wanted, and may have been the aim of the Bandargate conspiracy, which alleged that a senior Royal Family power broker was interfering in parliamentary elections. The government can tolerate the existence of a sizable Shia opposition bloc if that is the price of getting them to join rather than remain outside the system. What it did not want was a significant group of Sunni oppositionists that could ally with Al Wifaq to form a majority opposition bloc in the COR. Additionally, a vocal bloc of Sunni oppositionists like Abdul Aziz Abul and the Al Waad candidates could undercut arguments by hardliners in the Al Khalifa family and their media surrogates like Al Watan newspaper that only disgruntled Shia oppose the government. Reliance upon Sunni Islamists to wage battles on behalf of the government inside the COR could come back to haunt officials, should the Islamists' popularity and influence continue to grow.

¶25. (C) The Shia opposition's long-term commitment to stay inside the political system remains an open question. Al Wifaq Secretary General Salman has sent out soothing messages to both the government and the Sunni blocs, saying Al Wifaq intends to help make the political process successful and not stand against the government. Salman admitted in a press interview, however, that Al Wifaq retains the right to use all political tools available, including demonstrations, rallies, boycotting a parliamentary session or withdrawing from the COR entirely, if it is unable to pursue its legislative agenda. Relations between the executive and legislative branches will undoubtedly become strained as the oppositionists demand greater government attention and resources to combat social ills afflicting their constituents. For the long-term health of the political system, the government would be wise to engage on these issues and keep the opposition inside the parliament rather than out on the streets.

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